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ABSTRACT

There are three senses in which all persuasion is political: (1) persuasion seeks to restructure the organization of power; (2) persuasion itself is an exercise of power; and (3) all morally significant human conduct includes political dimensions. The comprehension of political events in dramatic terms is the burden of the author's thesis in this paper. "Drama" is a form of organizing and understanding material; the "theatrical" is what has attracted us to the material in the first place. The television series about the William C. Loud family of Santa Barbara is cited as an example to illustrate how the media fix human events in a situation which is amenable to description. Disposed to want drama and to want theatricality, our culture is prepared to sponsor the enormous economic and technical organization required for film and television. Having developed these media, we are influenced by them autonomously, and their requirements affect our politics ever more profoundly. (EE)

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TRENDS IN POLITICAL PERSUASION IN THE UNITED STATES

by

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(Delivered at the Convention of the Central States Speech Association, April 6, 1973)

All persuasion is political. There are three senses in which all persuasion is political. First, persuasion seeks to alter ratios and relationships of power. Indeed, on a societal level, I think that persuasion is wholly explicable in terms of its bearing on ratios and relationships of power. And, of course, anything having to do with the organization of power is within the province of politics.

All persuasion is political, second, because it is itself, at least potentially, a kind of power -- so that while persuasion is used to dispose power as an end, its very use is an exercise of power as a mean.

And finally, all persuasion is political because there is no morally significant conduct possible to human beings which does not have a political dimension. Plato recognized this for the polis, and Marx for the modern state.

It is the case, therefore, that the phrase, "political persuasion," is a redundancy, and when the managers of this program assigned me that phrase as a subject, they were -- inadvertently, no doubt -- giving me license to roam at large.

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The shackles of my category now having been sundered (You will recognize how political an act I have just performed), I can now submit my thesis. It is, simply, that the dramatic forms conveyed by mass media have become a matrix out of which persausion is constituted.

Our culture is, in fact, pervaded by the metaphor of drama as an explanatory principle. One has only to consider, for example, the immeasurable influence of Freudianism -- a paradigm founded upon a tragic drama; or role theory in social psychology; or the evident indispensibility of the concept of "role" in sociology and cultural anthropology; or, closer to our own field, the dramatistic pentad of Kenneth Burke. The examples could be multiplied, but perhaps it is enough for now to note summarily that many of the perspectives composing the last hundred years' systematic thought about human behavior have been perspectives shaped by the metaphor of drama.

And on a more popular level, of course, the dramatic metaphor is continuously nourished by the media -- most notably by television reportage, which emphasizes the dramatic and theatrical qualities of subjects, and which abjures subjects that are dramatically and theatrically deficient.

By the way, let me digress briefly here to indicate that I am assuming a distinction between the dramatic and the theatrical. By "dramatic," I mean a presentational form that has, among other characteristics, a temporal dimension, conflict or perplexity, two or more voices, and a course of consecutive disclosure. By "theatrical," I am referring to a quality of vividness or extravagance, a glitter of appearance. In the courtship rite of the peacock, it is the serial pattern of bidding, declining, importuning and accepting that is the

dramatic; it is the tail of the peacock that is theatrical. Drama is a way of organizing material; theatricality is a surface sheen. The dramatic is what we understand; the theatrical is what we notice. One is a form; the other is an integument. The dramatic is a way our minds have of working on material; the theatrical is what has attracted us to that material in the first place.

We have come to expect and to demand that media function dramatically and theatrically, not alone with fictional material, but with the literal as well. And so, the dramatization and theatricalization of political messages proceeds apace.

That latter trend -- the theatricalization of political messages -- has been much noticed. That is what pundits sweat over who lament the thirty-second commercial, the pancake make-up and dyed hair, the music and the banners, the toothy smile -- in sum, the spectacle of political campaigning.

The dramatization of politics, however -- the comprehension of political events in dramatic terms -- this has been less noticed, and this is the burden of my observation.

The nuclear political unit being the family--it may be appropriate to consider the William C. Louds of Santa Barbara as illustrative of my thesis. Aside from the fact that the family we saw on television was repeatedly and consciously subordinating itself to political models -- with its parliamentary deliberations presided over by a parent, and its extensive discussions of and involvement in a student election at the beginning of the series and a judicial proceeding at the end -- aside even from these obviously political considerations,the television series encapsulates in a remarkably

concentrated way some essential relationships between drama and politics.

We have, for one, the ostensible distortion of that family to meet the putative requirements of television. Each program in the series has a focus, each a central cast of characters, each a beginning, middle and end. We see in the series a family of shallow philistines: empty, money-oriented, "head pieces filled with straw." And then, by contrast, that same family comes onto the Dick Cavett program to denounce the series, and we find before us a group of people who are witty, self-possessed, poised, charming even -- seeming to confirm by their very deameanor their own invocation of the ancient opposition between appearance and reality.

What are the Louds really like? What is Tom Eagleton really like? What was our policy on Vietnam really like? Between the image on the screen and the truth falls the shadow, and we hear from one after another of our political leaders what we hear now from the Louds: It is not I, that luminous figure, that play of shadow and light -- it is not I. We heard it from Goldwater and from Johnson, from McGovern and from Humphrey. We hear it now from Nixon, and ominously. For they know and we know that being persuaded means accepting something to be the case. Whatever we believe to be true, of that we can be said to be persuaded -- and we are persuaded of something precisely to the extent that we believe it to be true. That is why this Roshomon effect that we have encountered in the Loud family series is pertinent to political persuasion. Their screams of epistemic foul are echoed by political figures who have submitted to television. In all these cases, persons are converted to personae,

and experience is transmogrified. In all these cases, political material is shaped to the forms of drama.

Consider Leni Riefenstahl's brilliant film, "Triumph of the Will," and the extent to which it not only documented the Nuremburg rally, but also -- as Neil Kleinman has argued in The Dream That Was No More A Dream -- was a highly distilled expression of the Nazi movement itself. Consider the historical drama that actuates Leninism -- the myth of struggle and ultimate resolution -- the materialistic counterpart of millenarianism. Consider the energy given every country's nationalism by the high drama of its mythic history, by its cast of heroes. And consider, at last, that at the very genesis and fountainhead of logic itself -- of the discipline for forming inferences and regulating thought -- is the precursive discipline of dialectic, which was not only an investigatory procedure (sufficiently noted when its link to logic is studied), but also a dramatic form!

Despite the protests of the Louds or of Nixon's staff, we confront here something quite different from simple distortion or sensationalism. What I think we see in the dramatic shaping of political material is a way we have of understanding political material. What we have in the forms of drama, in sum, may be some general epistemic requirements for the fixing of human events into a condition amenable to description. Dramatic form comports not alone with television or film as media, but more generally with the kinds of understanding we are prepared to have of such phenomena as the Loud family, or the Nixon presidency. These forms constitute a part of the grammar of our perception.

Invention being the mother of necessity, it seems likely that the development of electronic media has confirmed and perhaps extended the epistemic function of dramatic form. Disposed to want drama and to want theatricality, our culture was prepared to sponsor the enormous economic and technical organization required for film and television. And then, having developed these media, we are influenced by them autonomously, and their requirements affect our politics ever more profoundly.

There is one other facet of this subject that I want to mention before closing: It too bears upon popular dramatic form as a matrix for persuasion, and that theme is the epideictic function of persuasion and of political activity in general: The uses we make of politics to entertain us.

We should not understand this motive to be frivolous or insignificant or trivializing. We are entertained for a variety of reasons, and some of them are intimately bound up with political persuasion. We are entertained when we may transact ostensible risks without risk. We are entertained by the shadow of jeopardy. We are entertained by the semblance of commitment. We are entertained by a pattern of moral significance that is without the substance of moral significance. We are entertained by the unleashing of a proscribed chaos in the midst of order, and by a locus of order amidst chaos. We are entertained by placid dogs and musical seals, by flea circuses and dancing elephants -- perhaps because we believe domestication to recapitulate political phylogeny, perhaps because we are entranced by the dramatic reflection of our bestial ancestors taming themselves in that prehistoric covenant with which politics began.

Our presuppositions about the processes of politics and of persuasion have come down to us out of the past -- out of a past sometimes marked by absolutistic rulers and stratified castes, out of a clearer distinction than we now can sustain between the rulers and the ruled. Our received archetype is dyadic, with one moiety active and the other passive: a speaker and an audience. The model repeatedly fails our more open society.

Our political process is dialectical. Irresolution is characteristic of it. Issues are rarely terminated with finality. More typically, the voices and answering voices continue in a discourse without an end. Our capacity for understanding this dialectic depends, I submit, on our adjusting our critical suppositions to the subject -- to its momentum, to its continuously evolving order. And that requirement too commends the form of drama as an instrument of analysis.